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ABSTRACT

Recent studies of teachers and teaching pay greater attention to relationships among teaching contexts, teachers' practical knowledge, and enacted curricula. As a contribution to this body of work, this study grappled with the problem of understanding the knowledge teachers use to create curricula within workplace demands. Survey, participant observation, and case study methods were used over a 3-year period to investigate teachers' practical knowledge about connections between their efforts to create curricula and the employment relations at their workplace. Data from two case studies showed that employment relations were both a source of dilemmas and a resource for dilemma management. Competing educational and work imperatives became entangled and engendered teaching dilemmas. The teachers' differing educational considerations and dilemma management strategies reflected the different positions they occupied. In managing the dilemmas, the teachers considered a range of options and sought to utilize whatever resources they had, including the resources available to them due to their position as employees. Their use of positional power was not always conscious, as the central focus for reflecting on their dilemmas was their educational beliefs. It was predominantly against educational criteria that they judged the utility of strategies they used to manage their dilemmas. The strategies teachers devised to manage their dilemmas often led to new practices, at times upsetting the ways of being and behaving that had been established at the workplace and therefore requiring further reflection on desired ends and probable means. (Contains 16 references.) (EV)

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TEACHING DILEMMAS AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN CHILD CARE CENTRES

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' practical knowledge about connections between their efforts to create curriculum and the employment relations at their workplace was investigated over a three year period using survey, participant observation and case study methods. This paper draws on case study data to propose that dimensions of the employment relationship can be viewed as both a source of teaching dilemmas and a resource for managing dilemmas. It concludes by proposing that analysis of employment relations processes could enrich the knowledge early childhood teachers bring to, and develop through, their work as curriculum decision-makers.

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Recent studies of teachers and teaching give greater attention to relationships among teaching contexts, teachers' practical knowledge, and enacted curricula. As a contribution to this body of work this study grapples with the problem of understanding the knowledge teachers use to create curriculum within workplace demands. Current notions of context are very broad and there is a tendency among educational researchers 'to under-theorise the social milieu in which curriculum is enacted' (Halliwell, 1992:357). As a consequence, relationships between contexts and teaching decisions are not well understood. Researchers often 'emphasise the characteristics of particular individuals, and the full array of context variables continue to be largely ignored' (King, 1992:43).

The study investigated the usefulness of employment relations theories and concepts for explaining how workplace demands enter into teachers' thoughts and actions in creating curriculum with young children. This paper examines the decisions of two qualified early childhood teachers, Lesley and Irene (case names are fictitious), who feature in two of four case studies of teachers at work in child care centres. The focus for analysis is the intersection of teacher beliefs about what constitutes an appropriate curriculum for young children, and prevailing employment relations in the places where they make curriculum decisions. Concentrating on this dimension enabled the identification of points of contact between teachers' knowledge about children and learning, the practices they valued and the ways they negotiated constraints and opportunities within the work context.

Lesley and Irene worked in places where long hours of work and staff turnover made it difficult to establish and maintain consistency in daily routines, and in relationships among adults and children. These teachers found the potential for inconsistency to be a major decision-making issue for they believed that children are best able to learn and develop within consistent environments. Their attention to the social processes within which learning and development will occur fits well into perspectives on curriculum developed by theorists such as Connelly and Clandinin (1988), and Cornbleth (1990), who view curriculum as a complex social process in which teachers 'learners, subject matter and milieu are in dynamic interaction' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992:363).

CREATING CURRICULUM IN THE WORKPLACE

This multidisciplinary study is informed by three bodies of literature. Literature regarding teachers' knowledge-in-use as they create curriculum provided a focus for data collection. Recent research into the early childhood curriculum is highlighting the role of context in

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shaping teachers' curriculum knowledge and practice. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) note, 'all curriculum situations exist in a context and exert influences on the curriculum' (p.96). Research investigating curriculum from teachers' perspectives suggests that 'contexts inevitably enter into the curriculum implementation process' (Halliwell, 1992:357) not only influencing the parameters of actual practice but also shaping teacher knowledge as knowledge 'becomes situated with ... experience' (Doyle, 1992:509). The second body of literature, which views teaching as 'work', informed the comparative analysis of workplace variables in a range of settings in which early childhood teachers apply and develop their curriculum knowledge. Together these bodies of literature contribute towards a recognition of the extent of teachers' practical knowledge and an understanding that 'our curriculum decisions are framed within the particular social and cultural context in which we live—both in terms of our working lives and our broader living contexts' (McLean, 1994:76).

The language used by the two teachers, whose work is discussed below, reveals a depth of knowledge about the salience of context. Centre documents present a view of the curriculum as constructed 'within the framework of predetermined physical, temporal, interpersonal and organisational factors' (case document, *Philosophy of Care and Education*, June 1995:4). The teacher-Director, Lesley said: 'I don't really talk about curriculum or program. I talk mainly about an environment and how I work within that environment'. The teacher-group leader, Irene, stated that her 'alertness about children and availability to them' operated within the 'framework of all that is in place' at the centre in terms of the centre philosophy, adults' knowledge, and the physical environment. The third body of literature concerning employment relations has been central to theorising about the 'framework' and 'environment' within which these teachers apply and develop their practical knowledge. This literature supports the identification and analysis of dimensions of teachers' work contexts, such as the nature of relationships between managers and workers and the ways that work in child care settings is structured and regulated.

What are 'employment relations'?

The term 'employment relations' refers to both the legal relationship between employers and employees and 'the nature and quality of the day to day transactions' that take place between managers and workers (Sutcliffe & Callus, 1994:58). The study of employment relations draws on understandings from industrial relations and human resource management literature to investigate the 'problems and possibilities' inherent in the 'mix of common and competing interests' held by people who work together (Boxall, 1995:123). Employment relations issues, such as hiring staff, can be viewed from a number of perspectives depending on whether the focus is on outcome or process, the formal or the informal (see Fig. 1).

	Informal	Formal
Process	Workplace employment relations	Arbitration & trade union and employer association negotiation
Outcome	Custom & practice	Awards & Enterprise agreements

Figure 1: Formality and informality in employment relations processes & outcomes

Curriculum may be viewed from a perspective which recognises only formality and outcome: where curriculum is defined as a course of prescribed study. In a similar way, employment relations can be seen as deterministic and prescriptive although the relationship between legal contracts, such as industrial awards, and what happens at workplaces is, as with curriculum prescriptions, neither linear nor uncontested. Employment relations are partly structured by

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legal contracts. The variation between formal employment relations outcomes and workplace conduct has been described using the notion of custom and practice (Brown, 1973). Workplace behaviour develops over time as people informally negotiate and re-negotiate how work is organised and performed. Patterns of behaviour at particular workplaces come to differ from formal agreements, become established and gain a sense of legitimacy.

Custom and practice rules are 'governed by a reciprocity relationship' (Brown, 1973:84). One such custom and practice rule at a studied centre was established through the Director adopting a practice of not taking tea or lunch breaks. Her example was followed, and thereby legitimated, by the other full-time teacher. Both teachers offered similar educational and organisational reasons for not taking breaks. This unwritten rule was challenged when a newly-employed teacher attempted to negotiate a change to her roster to access her legal entitlement to tea breaks. The other teachers perceived this as a lack of willingness and commitment. The existence and operation of such custom and practice rules illustrates that analysis of workplace relations must consider the importance of tradition in determining the nature and quality of relations between people at work (Sutcliffe & Callus, 1994:43).

The development, structure and maintenance of employment relations

A study of employment relations also requires a consideration of the influence of wider issues as 'inter-related, economic, legal and social dimensions ... serve to indicate the manner in which employment relations develop, are structured and maintained' (Fells, 1989:472). Two structural features of child care services are briefly referred to here as an indication of how industry features are implicated in the formation and maintenance of particular employment relations: that centres are small workplaces and that child care is a service industry.

Most child care centres are small workplaces and, unlike schools, there is a large number of heterogeneous employers. Industrial relations literature suggests that these two factors influence both employer and employee behaviour. Sutcliffe and Kitay (1988) report that employees in small business tend to be less able to organise industrially and less likely to employ direct action and that small business employers tend to be less likely to comply with awards, to pay less than larger firms and to expect workers to 'take wider responsibilities, and ... be more flexible in their attitudes to what constitutes acceptable work roles' (p.529).

Small business employers were also found to be more reliant on 'the efforts of key groups of employees', in particular employees with managerial, supervisory or customer relations functions who, by virtue of the positions they occupy, have discretionary power over the organisation and performance of work (Sutcliffe & Kitay, 1988:527). For example, Lesley had a considerable degree of discretion in relation to both service delivery and work organisation. Her responsibilities included deciding centre philosophy and grouping structure, recruiting and rostering of staff, allocating tasks and supervising work. Although she generally exercised her positional power within the constraints of the budget she also sought to renegotiate spending limits on a number of occasions. For example, she negotiated with her employer for funds to employ additional staff. During these negotiations she was able to argue that there were sufficient funds available from the previous year. This points to the role played by industry economics in the development of particular employment relations. As a service industry, particular pressures are exerted on employers as labour costs constitute a much higher proportion of costs than in manufacturing industries.

RESEARCH PROCESS

This study of teaching was designed to explore how teachers in child care centres experienced dimensions of the industrial relations context and to describe teachers' knowledge about acting within work relationships to manage teaching dilemmas. A range of research methods was used to identify, document and represent teachers' practical knowledge about creating curriculum. Case studies were a major data source. Two other data sources, a postal survey and participant observation of teachers' involvement in the process of amending their award, were important for informing the construction, conduct and analysis of the case studies.

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In designing a research strategy to access those employment relations matters which were important to teachers, the notion of dilemmas became both methodologically and theoretically important. Talking with teachers as their dilemmas unfolded and asking them about the ways they tried to manage them led to the creation of negotiated stories of practice. According to Carter (1993) 'story is a distinctive mode of explanation characterised by an intrinsic multiplicity of meanings ... [which] accommodates ambiguity and dilemma as central figures or themes' (p.6). These stories have been incorporated into case studies which illustrate 'events as they occur in real life' and enable a consideration of 'a broad set of teacher-related concerns' (Fleet, Duffie & Patterson, 1995:83). Exploring and describing the teaching dilemmas as they unfolded within the employment context provided a 'strategy for strengthening and bringing together studies of action and of context in meaningful ways' (Goodson, 1990:310).

The data presented here was collected by participant observation and semi-structured, open-ended, audio-taped interviews conducted over a period of 12 months. Teacher collaboration was central to the definition and development of the stories of practice and the subsequent case studies. Tape transcripts and field notes were used to produce documents which collated the teachers' practical knowledge within categories determined by the researcher. These documents initially served to identify and describe teachers' dilemmas, clarify teachers' meanings, and focus discussion and reflection. Where possible teachers' language was preserved within the theoretical re-description. For example, the relationship between Irene and Lesley is described, using their words, as a 'generous' 'partnership'.

The data presented here is from two teachers working in a 58-place long day (11 hours) care centre in suburban Brisbane. It is sponsored by a non-profit organisation. The children, from babies to preschoolers, are cared for in four groups. Each group has its own large playground. At the end of the data collection period the centre employed 19 staff members. Lesley had worked as a teacher for 30 years, Irene for four years. Lesley had been the centre's teaching Director since it opened seven years ago. Irene was a mature age graduate who joined the staff at the beginning of 1992. This was her first teaching position.

In discussing the following teaching dilemmas it is noted that data presented here is confined to relations between these two teachers at the workplace. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss powerful structures beyond the workplace which impact on teachers' work (e.g., the Industrial Relations Commission and State mechanisms of funding and regulation) or to address the role of gender in shaping both the nature and quality of employment relations in child care. Also this study is delimited to those employment relations issues which these teachers expressed as relevant at that time. In this respect the study has been an iterative and reflective process. This paper contributes to the understanding of employment structures which other teachers may encounter when working in similar environments and perhaps offer them strategies they could use to manage their dilemmas.

TWO TEACHING DILEMMAS

The teaching dilemmas discussed here illustrate both the way employment relations enter into efforts to create curriculum and how teachers use their knowledge about acting within these employment relations to establish custom and practice arrangements more supportive of their educational aims. Both teaching dilemmas revolve around the organisation of staff working hours. Both Lesley and Irene were concerned about the consistency of the interpersonal environment which the children experienced. Their dilemmas are also linked because the generous partnership they had developed at work was a valuable resource for designing and implementing dilemma management strategies.

Lesley's dilemma involved the reorganisation of staff rosters to implement a 38-hour week. The main difficulty she experienced with this task was finding ways to maintain her educational ideal of keeping the number of caregivers who interacted with the children to a minimum within the organisational context of needing more part-time staff to enable the shortening of hours for full-time staff without loss of pay. She spoke about a 'need to rethink our ideas about what's ideal'.

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Irene's dilemma involved her experience that, at times, she did not have enough energy to work at a level she felt the children 'deserved'. She reported that 'energy levels greatly impact on how you interact with the children'. The main difficulty she experienced was finding ways to work with children which satisfied her professional beliefs within 'the labour process context of the 'constant and varied' demands of the work.'

Lesley: the teacher-Director

Lesley referred to the task of reorganising the rosters as being 'an enormous problem' and she was concerned about the increasing number of staff who were interacting with the children. Lesley believed it was 'far better' to have fewer people around but she also knew that more people did not 'necessarily add trauma, if they stay.... although numbers of people are difficult, it's the numbers plus the movement in child care'. Lesley held an 'ideal' that fewer staff should work with children yet she had found that long working hours contributed to high levels of turnover:

> *Last year, [having organised the rosters to provide] continuity of care for children, I felt I had neglected the staff. They were working nine and a half hours a day ... and by the time their rostered day off a month came they were exhausted. So I think we have to get a balance between children and staff ... because they don't keep going and they move out of the industry.*

Lesley needed to find alternative ways of organising work to promote consistency. The main way she did this was to have 'a philosophy ... right through the whole centre ... so that the children have every opportunity ... to blossom with the flow'. With this strategy staff were expected to work within the centre philosophy to create a consistent interpersonal and physical environment where children could be successful, discover, feel safe and relaxed. For this strategy to be successful staff would have to stay at the centre and build up knowledge and experience and this led Lesley to decide to alter the rosters and implement a 38-hour week, although it was not legally required.

Irene: teacher-group leader

Irene spoke of often feeling tired and said, 'Ideally, I would like to have fewer contact hours'. She reported that when she was relaxed and refreshed she experienced what children did differently and was able to respond to and interact with them in more 'immediate, personal and individual' ways. Some of Irene's workplace strategies to manage this dilemma involved changes to her own practice. One strategy was doing program documentation, preparation and maintenance tasks outside her paid rostered hours. This strategy enabled her to feel more successful in her work as she could give children and parents her immediate attention thereby contributing to better transitions and less time away from children. Irene spoke of making a 'conscious decision' to 'drop ... practical agenda[s]' and 'get in early' to meet children's needs. She found that this strategy led to a 'contented atmosphere' and a 'more satisfying day' for the children. Another instance of this strategy was when she came over a weekend and did landscaping to improve the safety and aesthetics of the environment. Irene said the landscaping made her work 'run smoother' and improved her 'pleasure in the job' because she was not continually having to speak to children in a 'controlling way'.

Irene continued to manage her teaching dilemma by working outside her paid hours for two reasons. One, because she found it did improve her ability to act on her knowledge about creating curriculum and two, because of her relationship with Lesley. Irene used the word 'generosity' to describe how she experienced their relationship. When I asked Irene if she received time-in-lieu for her landscaping work she said she did not expect financial reward but, 'in the knowledge' that she did such work, Lesley had organised for her to take accrued rostered days off in a block. When I asked Irene if this time had been formally counted up she said, 'No, it's done in the spirit of generosity.... you've been generous with your time, we'll be generous with your holidays'. She reported liking that arrangement as it seemed more 'human' to her.

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Negotiation and discretion within the employment relationship

The relationship the teachers had developed over time was a valuable resource for managing their teaching dilemmas. Irene and Lesley had a close, collegial working relationship, were generally able to discuss their dilemmas and gave each other support in managing them. This relationship enabled Irene to negotiate for improved working conditions in support of her curriculum goals, such as an extra staff member to assist during a particularly stressful time of the day. The extent of their working relationship was also evidenced by Irene helping Lesley draw up the new rosters.

Irene reported that working conditions offered at the centre were 'largely the result of the approach that the Director takes' and she spoke of Lesley's 'vision'. In explaining how the organisation of work generally supported her curriculum efforts she said, 'working at this centre offers conditions that are ... intrinsic to this site and to the vision the Director has of the broader centre'. Conditions which she attributed to Lesley's influence were the quality and number of staff, playground design and availability of resources. She believed that, 'There's that vision, that forward planning, it's all to do with the ... quality of the child's experiences. We can offer that experience, it makes the job easier'.

Lesley's ability to implement her vision and create flexible arrangements in support of curriculum was determined by her use of the discretionary power delegated to her by her employer. This discretionary power was considerable and, although theoretically operating within budgetary constraints, she successfully renegotiated spending limits during the study period. Lesley's use of her discretionary power, her practical knowledge about connections between centre organisation and promoting consistency, and her ability to negotiate with the Board on Management, had enabled her to implement a number of organisational and staffing practices which she believed promoted consistency, such as only enrolling children on a full-time basis, not blending groups at either end of the day and employing staff with higher qualifications than required by regulations.

Employment strategies were central to Lesley's management of the rostering dilemma. In exercising her discretion in employment matters Lesley made some decisions which she knew were controversial. Her approach to hiring and rostering was an eclectic blend of creative and forward thinking practices but included some custom and practice arrangements which are technically illegal according to industrial awards. Lesley's ideal solution to the rostering dilemma would have been to find one extra staff member for each group who would relieve for the core personnel for different periods of time and at different times of the day. Yet, she saw this as an 'impossibility' as she did not believe that people would be prepared to take such fragmented work. She used her discretion in employment matters as a resource in managing this aspect of her teaching dilemma.

Finding extra staff and incorporating them into the centre proved to be problematic for a number of reasons. One, Lesley had to reorganise the work of existing staff in order to create jobs that she believed would attract applicants. Two, she had to encourage functional flexibility in both existing staff and applicants. Three, finding satisfactory staff was very time consuming and stressful. New staff were employed on a casual basis for an indefinite trial period and, while Lesley and Irene both found aspects of this process unsatisfactory, Lesley believed it was necessary to delay offers of permanent employment until staff had demonstrated that they could contribute to consistency of approach by working within the centre philosophy. Four, the extra staffing costs were significant. Lesley's employment strategies implemented over the study period (primarily in implementing the 38-hour week) contributed to a budget over-run of $50,000. This amount was about 11 percent of the centre's gross income.

Managing dilemmas: reflecting on outcomes and generating new strategies

Irene found her strategy of doing work outside her paid rostered hours had enhanced her curriculum work but it did not prove a viable strategy for managing her dilemma. She was working even longer hours and had less time to recuperate from the demands of the work.

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When one of her long-term non-workplace strategies to manage her dilemma—finding other work at the end of the year—failed she began to consider other strategies. Irene's close and generous relationship with Lesley enabled her to negotiate a part-time position. Irene reflected on the competing values she tried to reconcile:

> *I think it's going to make a tremendous difference to me only working 30 hours a week. Whereas I don't think it's ideal perhaps for the kids ... maybe it's the way things have got to go, because the 38-hour week is going to make a difference that way.... it will mean there will have to be extra faces anyway, and if people can be fresher for their jobs. all the better.*

In a subsequent interview she said that she wanted to work two and a half days a week and Lesley had agreed to trial this arrangement as she was 'keen' for her to stay. They decided that each would work the full operational day with the children on two days of the week and have a 'cross-over day' when they each worked six hours. Irene felt she would manage this as she reported often working a 10-hour day anyway. They began working to this arrangement at the beginning of the following year.

Irene felt that this arrangement did work out and reported that only one child had really seemed affected by the 'unpredictability' of not knowing which teacher would be there on any particular day. Irene felt that having a full-time assistant helped this child and, in noting that somebody would be there fewer hours, she expressed her opinion that, 'it's probably a mistake to think that you're the person whose indispensable'. Irene described herself as mesmerised by her work and thought she would never again work full-time as a teacher in child care.

Lesley noted benefits of this arrangement in terms of the emotional behaviour of the children and her feelings of completeness in following a child's whole day at the centre:

> *When I'm here all day I find ... I just have more time and they [the children] are so much more placid and contented.... It is absolutely wonderful to have seen the children come in the morning, seen the mother and then said goodbye to the child and the mother in the evening.*

But Lesley still had work to do apart from her contact responsibilities and was still required to work every day. She found these arrangements very tiring and spoke of being 'wrecked' after her two 11-hour days. These work arrangements lasted for 10 months before Lesley became a non-contact Director and organised for another staff member to assume her contact responsibilities. Early in the following year Irene was successful in getting a part-time position at a sessional kindergarten but she agreed to continue working at the centre until April when Lesley thought she would be ready to reassume contact responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by posing a theoretical problem for early childhood teachers: the tendency to under-theorise the social context in which curriculum is created, thus limiting understanding of the way context influences practice. In the cases presented here the following employment relations constructs have enabled the description and understanding of some of the practical knowledge brought to bear by the teachers in their work as curriculum decision makers:

* the reciprocal nature of relations at work;
* processes leading to the development of workplace custom and practice rules;
* the role of discretion in setting the parameters within which teachers can act to devise strategies other than changes to their own practice; and
* the role of teachers' ability and willingness to negotiate.

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By focusing on connections the teachers perceived between their efforts to create curriculum and the prevailing employment relations this study has shown how these relations were both a source of dilemmas and a resource for dilemma management. The teaching dilemmas reported here illustrate how competing educational and work imperatives became entangled and engendered teaching dilemmas. The teachers' differing educational considerations and dilemma management strategies reflected the different positions they occupied. In managing the dilemmas the teachers considered a range of options, and sought to utilise whatever resources they had, including the resources available to them due to their position as employees. Their use of positional power was not always conscious as the central focus for reflecting on their dilemmas was their educational beliefs. It was predominantly against educational criteria, they judged the utility of strategies they used to manage their dilemmas.

Studying the unfolding of the teaching dilemmas enabled an exploration of aspects of the workplace which the teachers felt able to alter. The discretionary power available to, and used by, the teachers was an important factor in how they experienced and managed teaching dilemmas. Lesley made extensive use of her discretionary power in relation to employment matters. Both teachers were willing to negotiate, and did so from their positions as trusted and valued employees. The relationships built up at work could therefore be seen, in this case, as a vehicle for individual agency. Negotiation was an important strategy in securing resources and 'the willingness of teachers to engage in negotiation seemed to depend on their perceptions of themselves in power relations with others' (Halliwell, 1990:239–240). Economic arguments were important in Lesley's negotiations with her employer. When negotiating with the Board of Management to reduce staff working hours without reducing pay, Lesley was able to argue that enrolments were high and that they had generated a surplus the previous year. The budget deficit created over the study period had to be recouped and to maintain viability fees were expected to rise.

This paper has alluded to a process of teachers' knowledge about creating curriculum becoming situated, that is, as these teachers acted to manage teaching dilemmas they came to know particular ways of working that were more or less effective in that context. Lesley and Irene knew that shorter contact hours competed with traditional ways of providing consistent interpersonal environments. They also knew that in attempting to work in traditional ways in the child care context, long contact hours contributed to staff turnover and burnout thereby confounding efforts to promote consistency. The strategies devised to manage their dilemmas often led to new practices, at times upsetting the ways of being and behaving that had been established at the workplace and therefore requiring further reflection on desired ends and probable means. Further research would assist an understanding of the ways teachers' core beliefs about their professional responsibilities interact with physical and social aspects of their workplaces to challenge assumptions of what it means to teach.

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